

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

*2003-2004
Accessibility Plan*



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Introduction

In 2001, there were an estimated 1.5 million people in Ontario with self-disclosed disabilities. This number is expected to increase as the population ages.

In December 2001, the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001* (ODA) was passed into law. Its purpose is to improve opportunities for people with disabilities and to provide for their involvement in the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to their full participation in the life of the province.

One of the requirements under the ODA is that Ontario government ministries, municipalities, hospitals, school boards, colleges, universities, and public transportation organizations develop annual accessibility plans to make programs, services and buildings more accessible to people with disabilities. The plans must be made available to the public.

In the Speech from the Throne, delivered on November 20, 2003, the Ontario Government confirmed its commitment to working with Ontarians with disabilities on meaningful legislation that will allow them to fully participate in building a stronger province.

This document is the first annual accessibility plan for the Ministry of Education. The plan describes improvements to accessibility that the ministry has made to date and its commitments for the balance of the 2003-2004 fiscal year.

Report on Achievements

The Ministry of Education has a long history of accommodating the general public, employees and others with a range of disabilities by providing appropriate accommodation and ensuring equitable access to employment opportunities.

Policies and procedures have long been in place to ensure that ministry staff, job applicants and others with a range of disabilities receive the accommodation required. Ergonomic assessments are provided to staff, upon request, as are electronic and alternate format versions of human resources and learning materials. Members of the public have multiple ways to access ministry information, products and services through the ministry website, Teletypewriter (TTY) and Web Phone. Ministry publications are provided in accessible formats, such as Braille, upon request.

Through its Provincial and Demonstration Schools, the ministry has adopted very high accessibility standards and is leading by example. The eight schools provide educational services to deaf, blind and deaf-blind students, as well as to students with severe learning disabilities, in both day and residential settings. Pre-school in-home services to families of deaf-blind and deaf children are also provided.

All of the Provincial and Demonstration Schools are accessible to students and staff. Some best practices include:

- accessibility to people using scooters, power wheelchairs and attendants;
- automatic doors, accessible fountains, hallways, doorways and sidewalks;
- international and universal symbols for accessibility and large font, and other special format materials for information and way finding;
- accessible parking spots at front and other entrances;
- evacuation plans to ensure the safe evacuation of people with disabilities, which are reviewed annually;
- consideration of accessibility in meeting planning;
- provision of American Sign Language (ASL) or langage des signes québécois (LSQ) interpreters and interveners;
- preparation of special format materials;
- information on accessibility in public event marketing;
- extensive use of TTYs and other tools, with staff trained in their use; and
- provision of learning and information materials in alternative formats, upon request.

Over the past year, the ministry has continued to build on measures already taken to improve accessibility and opportunities to people with a range of disabilities. It has also undertaken several new initiatives to improve accessibility for its employees and the public.

A Ministry Accessibility Planning Team was established to plan, monitor, evaluate and report on progress in enhancing and improving accessibility for people with disabilities to services provided directly by the ministry. Ministry managers and supervisors completed training on how to fulfill the government's obligations to accommodate the accessibility needs of its employees and job applicants who have disabilities.

As well, ministry websites were made accessible to people with disabilities, as required under Section 6 of the ODA, with the sites now meeting the Web Accessibility Guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium. In addition, all new web pages are now reviewed for accessibility by the ministry before posting.

Commitments and Strategies for 2003-2004

Over the next year, the ministry will build on efforts already taken to improve opportunities and accessibility to people with disabilities. It will use its first year of accessibility planning to build a strong base for preventing barriers in the future. This includes putting in place mechanisms to ensure that the impact on accessibility is considered in key ministry processes, including policy and program development, business planning, communications and event planning. As well, the ministry will take measures to ensure that staff is increasingly aware of disability issues and has the knowledge and skills required to provide good customer service to people with disabilities.

A central part of the ministry's work will be to continue to ensure that the ministry's website is fully accessible to people with a range of disabilities. As well, the ministry will continue to broaden the multiple ways its information, products and services can be accessed through such tools as Web Phone, TTY, Braille and other alternate formats, making sure that staff are trained in the use of these technologies that often provide primary access to government for people with disabilities.

Methods to be taken to prevent new barriers

During the 2003-04 fiscal year, the ministry will undertake a number of activities to ensure that its proposals for new acts, regulations, policies, programs and services are assessed for their potential effect on people with disabilities. These activities include:

- establishing a process to assess progress made on its Annual Accessibility Plan;
- developing mechanisms to review all new policies, programs and communications initiatives to ensure accessibility;
- monitoring the ministry's web site to ensure it continues to be fully accessible; and
- building on measures already taken to increase the accessibility of the ministry's internal internet site for employees.

Business areas to be reviewed

Acts and Regulations

The ministry is committed to ensuring that its acts and regulations do not create barriers for people with disabilities. In 2003-04, the ministry will review various regulations that have previously been identified as including out-of-date and inappropriate language, such as "trainable retarded", and will replace such terms with current and acceptable language.

The following regulations will be reviewed:

*Education Act – Revised Regulation of Ontario 1990
Regulations 285, 298, 306*

*Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996
Ontario Regulation 184/97*

Policies and Programs

The ministry will build on its current practices to ensure that the impact on accessibility is considered in all new and ongoing policy and program development. Tools, questions and checklists on disability considerations will be developed to aid policy and program staff in their work.

Human Resources

The ministry will review its Orientation Program for employees to ensure information on staff rights to accommodation, the managers' responsibility to accommodate and any associated mandatory training is developed and included in all new packages. This will also involve a review of the ministry's internal Internet site to ensure that information on employee accommodation is clear and current.

As well, the ministry will review its youth marketing initiative, for the recruitment of young people into the Ontario Public Service, to identify and remove any barriers to accessibility in materials, presentations and locations.

Field Offices

All ministry field offices will be reviewed to identify communications barriers to staff and the public, and a plan will be developed, with implementation to begin in 2004-2005, to remove any barriers identified.

Internal Information Technology (IT) Services

The ministry will review its IT advisory services to ensure that accessibility is considered in the procurement of software and applications for ministry branches. As well, it will review its IT Help Desk for services to staff with disabilities and provide training as necessary.

Internal Communications

The ministry will ensure accessibility is considered in the development of a new ministry E-Mail Guide.

Practices and Services

The ministry will build on its current services to the public by ensuring that all front-line and telecommunications staff have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide good customer service to people with a broad range of disabilities, including physical, mental and learning disabilities.

Services to the Public

The ministry will conduct focus groups with reception, frontline, public inquiry and hotline staff to assess their level of knowledge about accessibility issues, the use of various alternate communication tools and the skills needed to provide good customer service to people with disabilities. A plan will be developed by the ministry to respond to any identified training needs, with implementation to begin in 2004-2005.

Actions to be taken

Improved staff awareness of disability issues

Over the next two years, a Staff Awareness and Education Campaign will be developed to raise overall knowledge of disability issues and how to remove barriers for the public and for staff.

This will include the development of a Ministry Accessibility Awareness internal Internet site where staff can access information on disabilities such as fact sheets, quick tips, resource lists and other information links, as well as new guidelines on procurement and accessibility and how to respond to requests for publications in accessible formats.

As well, “Lunch N Learn” sessions will be provided to staff on disability issues and disability awareness will be incorporated in the Deputy Minister’s all staff meetings. Articles on disability will be developed for the ministry’s Gazette newsletter.

Improved accessibility in facilities

The ministry will build on existing procedures already in place to continue to improve emergency evacuation processes for people with disabilities in ministry buildings.

Improved accessibility in technology

The ministry will purchase new software as part of its ongoing work to ensure that its public web pages are accessible to people with disabilities. It will also develop a new, accessible template for the ministry internal Internet site.

The following actions will also be taken:

- support and advice will be provided to branches in their implementation of the new accessible internal Internet template;
- updates and information on accessibility issues will be provided to staff involved in internal Internet development;
- the Ministry Guide to Web Publishing will be updated to include information on accessibility to internal Internet developers;
- all new web pages will continue to be reviewed for accessibility by the ministry's website co-ordinator before posting; and
- an accessibility checklist will be developed for general software and applications to ensure that all new information technology (IT) purchases support the widest accessibility.

For more information

Questions or comments about the ministry's accessibility plan are always welcome.
Please phone:

General inquiry number: 416-325-2929 or 1-800-387-5514

TTY number: 1-800-263-2892

E-mail: *info@edu.gov.on.ca*

Ministry website address: *www.edu.gov.on.ca*

Visit the Ministry of Citizenship's Accessibility Ontario web portal at:
www.gov.on.ca/citizenship/accessibility. The site promotes accessibility and provides
information and resources on how to make Ontario a barrier-free province.

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